

St. Lawrence University Gen Ed Humanities Assessment Fall 2019 University Assessment Committee February 2020

In Fall 2019, the Assessment Committee began its first round of General Education assessment with courses that faculty members have designated as fulfilling the learning goals of our **Humanities graduation requirement**. This requirement was approved by the SLU faculty in 2013 as part of a larger curriculum revision.

Courses fulfilling the Humanities (HU) requirement have primary learning goals in which students develop:

(a) an enhanced awareness of the variety of ways humans understand, signify, and make meaning of their experiences

and/or

(b) an enhanced awareness of how cultures and the interpretations of cultures change over time.

To this end, the Assessment Committee developed a simple, 4 point rubric with the scoring levels of “absent”, “emerging”, “proficient” and “exemplary”. All faculty who taught one or more humanity courses in the fall 2019 semester were asked to participate. A total of 27 faculty did, contributing to 470 scored papers at the end of the Fall semester. About half of the courses were 100-level courses and half were upper-level (200 and 300-level) courses.

One of the first lessons learned was that we needed to communicate the assessment to faculty earlier in the semester to allow for more planning. We had rolled out the assessment project on November 19, which was not enough lead time for some faculty to participate.

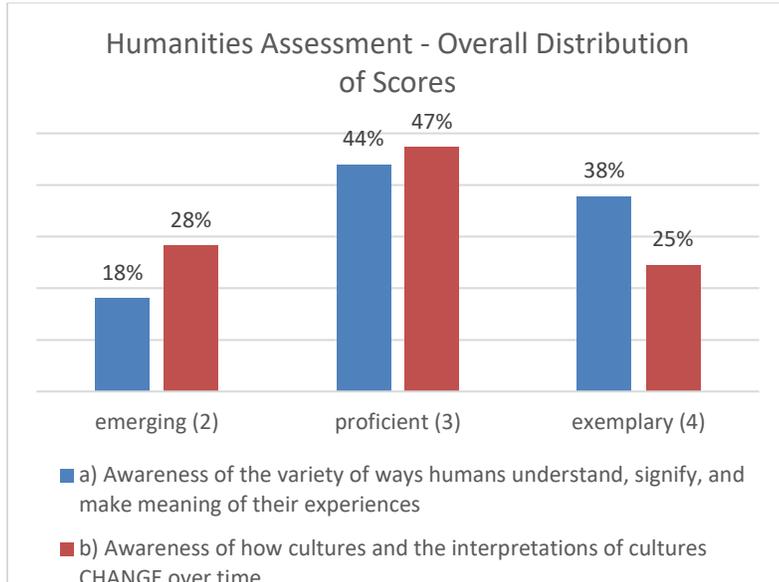
In addition, we also learned that we needed to clarify the scoring level of “absent”. Some faculty assigned the score of “absent” to indicate that the evidence of the learning goal was absent, while others used the score of “absent” to indicate that a student did not submit the assignment. The rubric has since been clarified, and for the purpose of this analysis, all scores marked “absent” were removed.

We then merged some demographic information into the file, such as students’ class year, gender, and race/ethnicity, academic division of major, how many humanity courses (including this one) taken thus far, and off-campus study participation. Data were analyzed by student characteristics only (and not by course characteristics), as this is not a departmental assessment project but general education assessment. The discussion below is based on frequencies and regression analyses.

Overview of Findings

Eighty percent of all students who were assessed for (a) **are meeting learning goal (a)** “the variety of ways humans *understand, signify, and make meaning* of their experiences” and **70%** who were assessed for (b) **are meeting learning goal (b)** “*how cultures and the interpretations of cultures* change over time” (meaning they scored “proficient” or “exemplary” – see figure 1.)

Figure 1: Frequency distribution of assessment scores

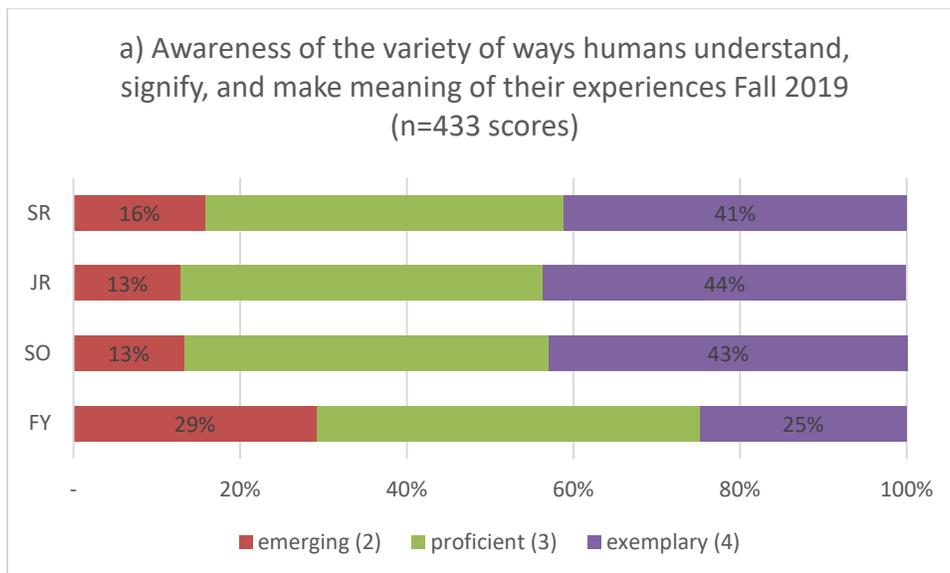


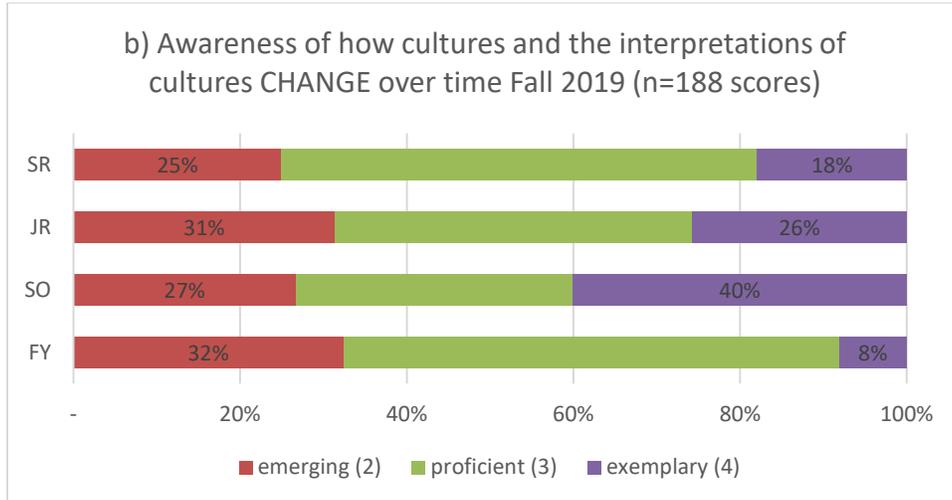
The fact that twice as many papers were scored for (a) than (b) suggests that **more HU-designated courses might address learning goal (a) than (b).**

The difference in scores - learning goal (a) with a mean of 3.2 compared to learning goal (b) with a mean of 3.0 - further suggests that **it might be more difficult for students to accomplish learning goal (b) than learning goal (a).**

One of the most significant findings is the **growth from first year to second year** for learning goal a; for learning goal b, juniors and seniors seem to go a little bit backward.

Figure 2: Humanities Assessment Scores by Class Year





Other take-aways:

- There are no differences based on the number of Humanities courses taken.
- Scores for students majoring in the sciences and in the humanities are particularly high, yet not statistically different. However, students majoring in the arts (AAH, music and PCA) seem to have statistically lower scores for learning goal (a).
- Scores are higher for students who have studied off-campus, on both domestic and international programs.
- Women score higher than men, particularly for learning goal (b).
- While not statistically significant, international students seem to score higher on the Humanities goals than domestic students while US students of color (in particular African-American and Multi-Racial students) have lower scores than other students.

Open-Ended Comments

In addition, faculty were encouraged to comment on the assessment project itself and/or the learning goals. A brief summary of the comments is below:

- Liked the assessment, found it easy to use
- Didn't learn anything new
- Two participating visiting faculty were not aware before that the course fulfilled the Humanities requirement
- Learning goal/rubric has too many "and" statements – make need to be broken down into separate distinct goals
- Distance between the rubric scores might be too far apart – some would like more than 3 levels

- Some uncertainty about the meaning of categories – absent or proficient seem clear, emerging and exemplary, less so.
- The way our learning goal is phrased makes it difficult to assess – specifically how to assess “awareness”. Also, “awareness” is a fairly low bar.
- Several suggestions for some rewording of the Humanities goals to expand the definition and make it more assessable.

Conclusions

The assessment indicated that overall, most students appear to meet our learning goal as currently stated by the time they graduate. In order to gain more robust findings, the assessment committee should repeat the Humanities assessment in the near future, with the improved rubric (correcting the ambiguity of the “absent” rating) and more lead-time for faculty.

Given that some faculty were not aware of the gen ed requirement their course fulfilled, we recommend that department chairs orient all new faculty to the general education learning goals and make them aware of the designation(s) that pre-existing courses carry.

It would be worthwhile to discuss what might contribute to the difference in scores by race/ethnicity, as these findings are still present when controlling for other factors such as class year, gender, study abroad participation, etc.

Finally, comments from faculty suggest that there might be some interest in revisiting our existing gen ed Humanities goal. One of our attempts might be to bring the 27 faculty members who participated in this assessment together in a meeting to discuss the learning goal. Maybe a Friday lunch?

Appendix 2 – Open-Ended Comments from Faculty

Assessment

- Liked rubric, easy to use (4 comments)
- Some critique over lateness of process
- Assessment created awareness that course is fulfilling also the HUM requirement (e.g. one faculty commenting on constructing assignment in particular with the DIV13 designation in mind; 2 visiting faculty members did not realize that their course had the HUM designation); learned that some assignments could be designed more intentionally with the HUM learning goal in mind/be incorporated in own grading rubric, etc.
- Didn't learn anything new
- Interest in tracking students over time
- Faculty member noting that students did better with a) than b)
- Liked assessment, would find more helpful if more than one assignment of student could be used for scoring

Rubric

- although it's possible for an assignment to ask students to demonstrate ways that people "understand" AND "signify" AND "make meaning," I could not establish that the assignment I assessed asked students to do all three, so I had in mind only "understand" and "make meaning" in scoring the students' work. So again, the wording needs to be much clearer, OR perhaps "a" encompasses too much, and should be broken down into two or more distinct goals.
- I found it easy to measure proficient or absent. Emerging and exemplary were difficult. In the future, I would for each essay option make up a list of criteria that would meet exemplary before I graded. As it is it was less methodical or more impressions that guided my rating. But I could easily create a specific set of criteria for mastery given the assignment.
- Clarify "absent" – as not present in assignment vs no assignment received
- The distance between "some" and "significant" for Learning Goal "b" seems a bit too far apart.
- would prefer at least *four* evaluative levels; "emerging" is too euphemistic and does not quite encompass work that I would consider "weak." (another comment similar to this, would prefer 5 categories)
- borderline unassessable. Unclear what counts as exemplary or proficient *awareness*. Taken as a binary property, it is pretty clear that all of the student work I assessed showed awareness - for the assignment students had to reflect upon their own behavior in light of course readings and concepts. [...]because the goal was defined in terms of awareness, all students ended up rating as exemplary or proficient. I don't intend this as a criticism of the rubric provided, as I don't really have another way to formulate one that is general enough to be cross-disciplinary and consistent with the stated goal.

Learning Goal

- wording
 - Learning goal a: "*the* variety of ways" makes it sound like there's one set of varieties, so why not say more simply and clearly "different ways"? It also could be interpreted as suggesting that HU courses should teach students about all possible ways humans make meaning etc.
 - What are the distinctions between "understand" and "make meaning"?
 - Learning goal b: "Awareness of how . . . the interpretations of cultures CHANGE over time." Is this asking about *how* cultures are interpreted by students in HU courses, and how this changes over time? Or about how various cultures' interpretations change over time? I assume the latter but couldn't be certain, so I didn't score this learning goal.
- I also think students should also see how culture is related to other aspects of society (e.g. political and economic change) and to power more generally. Culture is both shaped by power and a medium of power.
- In order to assess whether the students' awareness was 'enhanced,' I might find a way to assess their initial level of awareness at the beginning of the semester. Goals: the Stanford Humanities site adds that humanities research is distinct from the sciences in that "humanists are interested in raising questions, rather than providing absolute answers." Something like that could be added to our goal (especially for research based courses).
- Visiting faculty: I honestly don't understand the worth or meaning of the first learning goal. I assessed based off of my own interpretation, which is to view how well the student made sense of human historical experiences. However, this seems sufficiently vague to not be of much use.
- As phrased, the learning goal seems to prioritize the production of meaning rather than criticizing the meaning produced. A lot of what I do in my classes involves interrogating existing narratives; this learning goal tends to take meaning at face value--meaning is made, but who are the makers? Shouldn't this question also be carefully considered in a humanities course?
- I find the assessment criteria overly broad. For example, the study of history is itself change over time. This is one standard learning goal of history departments but it can be hard to assess in a single assignment versus grade. I also find the first criteria overly vague, as "make meaning" can be interpreted in a variety of ways.

RUBRIC FOR GENERAL EDUCATION ASSESSMENT Humanities (HU)

Courses have primary learning goals in which students develop:

- (a) an enhanced awareness of the variety of ways humans understand, signify, and make meaning of their experiences and/or
- (b) an enhanced awareness of how cultures and the interpretations of cultures change over time.

Instructions:

1. Choose a course assignment from the second half of the semester in which students must demonstrate an awareness of a) and/or b).
2. Score each student's assignment and enter the score in the EXCEL spreadsheet.
3. After scoring, please use the text box to provide feedback to the Assessment Committee reflecting on how the rubric and scoring worked, what you learned from this assessment and sharing any reflections on the Learning Goals as currently written.

LGs	Exemplary	Proficient	Emerging	Absent
Awareness of the variety of ways humans understand, signify, and make meaning of their experiences.	Shows sophisticated understanding of specific ways of interpreting the world and making meaning of human experiences.	Shows sufficient understanding of specific ways of interpreting the world and making meaning of human experiences.	Shows minimal understanding of specific ways of interpreting the world and making meaning of human experiences.	
Awareness of how cultures and the interpretations of cultures CHANGE over time	Shows a sophisticated understanding of the specific ways that one or more cultures AND cultural interpretations have changed over time. Shows a sophisticated ability to reflect on the processes by which changes in cultures and cultural interpretations occur.	Shows a significant understanding of the specific ways that one or more cultures AND cultural interpretations have changed over time. Shows a significant ability to reflect on the processes by which changes in cultures and cultural interpretations occur.	Shows some understanding of the specific ways that one or more cultures AND cultural interpretations have changed over time. Shows some ability to reflect on the processes by which changes in cultures and cultural interpretations occur.	